

LAOS

# Laos Unlikely to Mount Big Offensive This Year

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Aug. 8—Qualified Laotian and American sources assert that Government troops will mount no major offensive during this rainy season, contrary to the usual pattern of the war.

Last year at this time the Government forces staged their most successful campaign in five years, recapturing the Plaine des Jarres in the north and penetrating in the south into the region of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. The gains were erased in the annual dry-season offensive of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces this year.

Although there may be political reasons for the expected military moderation—primarily hope that a peace conference may be brought about—the principal reason is military, according to the best-informed sources.

The heart of the matter, according to these sources, is that the best Government forces in the north, the American-sponsored Meo guerrillas of Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, have been badly hurt and the best troops in the south have wilted under heavier pressure occasioned by the spread of the war into Cambodia.

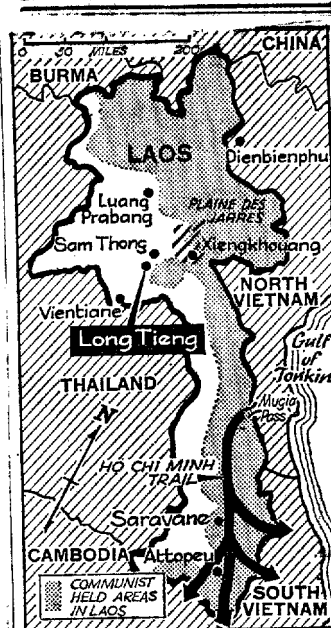
While the Communist offensive in the north last spring fell short of capturing General Vang Pao's operational headquarters and American-operated air and logistics base of Long Tieng, it inflicted heavy losses on the Meo troops and spread havoc among them by threatening the Meo population centers where the soldiers' families are encamped.

Americans close to the Meo chieftain said that his morale has improved after fits of severe depression over the military reverses but that his problems of reorganization, recruitment and retraining were so great as to preclude major action against an enemy who so far has given no sign of his usual rainy-season withdrawal for refitting.

However, most military experts believe that General Vang Pao will mount an operation to extend his radius of operations around Long Tieng.

While American opinion of the Meo general remains high despite the present ebb in his fortunes, the general whom Americans consider second only to General Vang Pao has taken a deep plunge in Laotian and American esteem. He is Maj. Gen. Phassouk Somly, commander of the southernmost Fourth Military Region.

"Phassouk collapsed," an uninvolved senior military expert said, describing the general's abandonment of the government enclave of Attapeu last April and Saravane in June. General Phassouk's apparent defeatism caused Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, commander of the Fifth Military Region, to comment in an interview that enemy psychological warfare was taking a toll among Laotian generals.



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Commander of U.S.-backed Meo units is expected to try to widen his radius of operation near Long Tieng.

It also caused General Kouprasith last month to make a spectacular break with the prevailing warlord philosophy of Laotian generals, which makes regional commanders show more jealousy over holding onto their troops than a feeling of unity under which troops from any command could be deployed according to national need.

General Kouprasith last month sent what he called his two elite battalions, one-fifth of his total strength, to the far-off island of Khong, in the Mekong River on the Cambodian border, at a time when General Phassouk seemed prepared to abandon the island.

Khong is the home of the aristocratic Abhay family, and General Kouprasith's action is considered here less a break with the tradition of regional jealousy between generals than an assertion of the continuing hold of feudalism on Laos.

Prompted by the declining situation of the army, Premier Souvanna Phouma, who also holds the defense portfolio, named Finance Minister Sissouk na Champassak his delegate for defense matters, in effect, as acting Defense Minister.

Prince Sissouk, whose modern concepts of government have earned him the admiration of American officials here, is aware that the army is in a bad state. In an interview, he stressed his eagerness to reorganize it for greater combat effectiveness and his awareness that this would involve him in fights with his generals.

Prince Sissouk's appointment is viewed here not only as of military significance but as even more so politically. Prince Souvanna Phouma, who is 68 years old, remains vigorous and shows no signs of wanting to loosen his hold. But in an interview he stressed his age in explaining why he has named Prince Sissouk and refused to deny speculation that he has finally chosen a successor.